



When Timothy Piazza pledged a fraternity at Pennsylvania State University in February 2017, he had hoped to find a brotherhood.

To join the fraternity, he endured severe hazing rituals, one of which ended with Piazza collapsing down a set of basement stairs, where he was left alone without medical attention. Ultimately, the injury led to his death.

His girlfriend of three years, Kaitlyn Tempalsky, told reporters that Piazza joined the fraternity looking for friendships. She told the New York Times that “he wasn’t in it for the partying ... He really wanted that brotherhood.”

Male friendships are becoming a rarity in American culture, Catholic leaders say, which could lead some men, like Piazza, to look for friends in dangerous situations.

Historically, occasions for brotherhood were systemically built into many cultures, Catholic psychologist Dr. Jim Langley told CNA.

Listing the examples of chopping down trees or heading into battle together, Dr. Langley said, “It’s our base coding, in our human nature as men” to complete projects or engage in activities together – though in contemporary culture, men are becoming more isolated.

“Men who are isolated are prone to all sorts of mental health problems – anxiety and depression. Specifically among men that we see in our work, men who are isolated are much more prone to addiction to pornography.”

Langley explained that the source of pornography addiction may stem from a desire for intimacy, even for male friends.

“Men in general struggle with [intimacy], it’s a pretty common thing. But it’s not just romantic intimacy, and it’s not just intimacy related to woman, we also have a longing for brotherhood.”

Because humans are physical, intellectual, and relational beings, he said, our sense of identity is not discovered by being alone, it is rather found in the context of other people.

“Specifically, figuring out how we can contribute in relationship and how relationships contribute to us.”

Matthew Schaefer, director of student development at Franciscan University of Steubenville, agreed.

“I am the best man I can be when I have strong male friendships. We hear in Scripture that ‘iron sharpens iron,’ and so it is with men,” Schaefer said.

“When men engage in true friendships – and by this I mean more than spending time together playing sports or video games – they can encourage one another toward holiness.”

Schaefer pointed to the household system at Franciscan University, through which more than half of the university’s students participate in small, single-sex faith communities.

“These same-sex communities help members grow in mind, body, and spirit and hold each other accountable to ongoing conversion.”

“In men’s households, they are encouraged to be on more of a schedule by committing to weekly gatherings, generally focused on prayer. They are present to console in times of need and celebrate in times of joy. They are brothers for the Christian walk.”

This type of accompaniment is not easily accomplished, said Daniel Porting, a missionary leading FOCUS Greek outreach at Southern Methodist University, who reflected on his own college experience in the Phi Gamma Delta fraternity.

Porting told CNA that most fraternities have mentoring programs, but that those programs are not always taken seriously.

“So that’s a very good structure, I’m not saying they do it well, but there is a structure in every fraternity where they want to inspire that good authentic and organic friendship, where it starts on a one-on-one level, where one person can accompany another,” he said.

But secular culture is struggling to foster this type of friendship, Dr. Langley said, “because an authentic friendship with men, in some ways, needs to be reinvented.”

“As men, we connect through doing things side-by-side, but if you look at the routes that men have to connect with each other, it’s very superficial.”

Dr. Langley said that some social norms and stereotypes make it difficult for men to pursue deep friendships with one another.

“Until recently in our culture, being affectionate with another man was really frowned upon and looked at as being effeminate, or a person would worry about [appearing] homosexual.”

Research conducted by Dr. Niobe Way, a psychology professor at New York University, published in 2013 by the American Sociological Association, showed that male friendships, which include emotional vulnerability, are typical during boyhood. But as boys get older, and deep male friendships become associated with homosexuality, she said men lose this avenue of emotional vulnerability.

“It is only in late adolescence – a time when, according to national data, suicides and violence among boys soar – that boys disconnect from other boys,” said Way in a 2013 article in Contexts magazine.

“The boys in my studies begin, in late adolescence, to use the phrase ‘no homo’ when discussing their male friendships, expressing the fear that if they seek out close friendships, they will be perceived as ‘gay’ or ‘girly.’”

Mark Harfiel, vice president of Paradisus Dei, a family-based Catholic ministry, said that when culture doesn’t support true masculinity, men lose sense of what it means to be authentically human.

“When you turn from Christ and begin to make all truth relative with no absolutes, you begin to lose a sense of what it even means to be human. All relationships have become sexualized and masculinity itself has even come into question.”

Secular culture often promotes a damaged view of masculinity, Daniel Porting said. He suggested that there are three main characteristics of heightened masculinity in the culture: an emphasis on power, pleasure and wealth.

“And I think that those all lead to unfulfillment and a lack of joy.”

Porting noted that many college-aged men with whom he works have suffered from a lack of authentic masculine role models, which creates wounds in men and impedes the desire to be loved.

The FOCUS missionary said these wounds are difficult for men to address, and added that when he meets men on campus he will steer away from questions like, “how is your life growing up?” or “how is your family?”

These questions “trigger something that is very wounding because someone didn’t step up and be a good role model,” he said.

Every parish needs to have an opportunity for men to find fraternal bonds and spiritually

rich accountability, Harfiel added. That Man is You, a program affiliated with Paridus Dei, is one possibility, he said, noting the group has created an estimated 1,000 male fraternal groups and reached over 100,000 men in the past 12 years.

However, this avenue might not be available for everyone, and Langley acknowledged that some men struggle with an even bigger problem – namely, fear.

“If there are not opportunities, one could create opportunities, connections with other people, but we’re afraid to be the first person to do that. We’re afraid to meet new people. We are afraid to be real with other people. So the virtue which would overcome all these virtues really is truly courage.”

Especially if there is no men’s ministry at the parish, Dr. Langely said, most likely other men in the parish are feeling the same way. He added that most people will be flattered by an invitation, “because it feels good to be noticed.”

This invitation, he said, doesn’t need to be big. It could simply be asking a gentleman (and maybe his wife) out for a bite to eat, or starting a small parish group of guys who go out periodically for beers.

“If you do sense a call to start something, then don’t be afraid to keep it simple. A friend of mine at my parish started a men’s group called ‘faith fermentation,’ which is just a fancy title for a bunch of guys going to get some beers together.”

“So don’t worry about starting anything big. Just start something that ‘scratches your own itch,’ and most likely it will scratch the itch for connection that other men have too.”

Prioritizing male friendships with priests, peers, old and young adults, Langley said, takes courage. He noted Christ’s own example of surrounding himself with friends.

“We are blessed with this wonderful example of Jesus Christ, and he told his apostles that he was their friend – they weren’t just his pupils, they weren’t just the flock he was ministering to.”